

Halvard Johnson

Americans Playing Slow-Pitch Softball at an Airbase near Kunsan, South Korea

— Early September

The first game of
the evening begins
about five-thirty.

The men (not that
only men play —
one team has

a female catcher)
finish their work
on whatever they

work on —
correspondence,
water mains, Phantoms —

get out of one uniform,
into another, and come
out to the ballpark.

The lights go on early.
By eight here it's totally
dark. Half an hour earlier

the sky was a tangle
of rose, magenta,
lavender, as the sun

went down in China,
beyond the Yellow Sea.
Brisk wind tonight—

raises the infield dirt,
whips it into narrowed eyes
of batter, catcher, umpire,

the three or four spectators
in the bleachers behind them.
A regulation seven-inning

game is played, unless one
team is so far out in front
that the ten-run rule

is invoked, ending
the game after five. A ball
the size of a small

grapefruit is lofted
into the air, a slight
backspin making it

seem to drift and float
down toward the plate.
No easy hit. The batter,

has to apply his own
muscle to put it anywhere.
This batsman clips the top

and bounces to the third
baseman, who fires to first
for an easy out. He shrugs

and jogs to the dugout.
The next batter flies out,
and the game ends 15-zip

after five full innings.
Another two teams take the field,
Some of the players stand

by to watch the second game,
but most wander off,
concerned with other things.

The bleachers are fuller now –
a rowdier crowd, raring for action.
Crisp evening air. Korean girlfriends

curl up close for warmth. An airman
pops open a beer. Behind their
backs a pair of Phantoms

roar into the sky, their afterburners
glowing as they lift from the runway,
vanish into black clouds. Uncertain

weather tonight, a stiff wind, high
scudding clouds. A tricky weather
system reaching north to

the DMZ, east to the Sea of Japan,
south to the East China Sea.
Typhoon Orchid approaches Okinawa,

far to the southeast. Possibly
this is all a part of that. Inning
after inning goes by, vanishing

into a past that exists only on paper.
Hits, runs, and errors go down
in the league's record book,

but screw the past, we're having
fun tonight. Neither the pitcher,
the fliers, nor the Korean

women in the stands
remember or care about a war
that happened thirty years ago.

It's the girl's fathers who have
the bad dreams, wake in terror
in the night. Their grandfathers, too.

They'll all support General Chun
and pray he'll protect them
from devils. A friend of mine

in Europe once wrote a poem
about memory and the historical
imagination, which ended

with these lines:
"Our assignment is to remember,
to deliver blows."

No American could have written that.
We live our lives inning, by inning,
season by season, war by war.

I'll end this in an American way—
with the words of the great black,
American pitcher, Satchel Paige:

“Don’t look back.
Something may be
gaining on you.”

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